

Appropriations Committee Public Hearing on Agency Consolidation

4 March 2011

Good evening and thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak. In the interest of full disclosure, I must tell you that I am chairman of the board of directors for the Board of Education and Services for the Blind, the agency we know as BESB. Having said that, I want to be clear that I appear before you not in any official capacity but as a lifelong recipient of educational, vocational rehabilitation--which I will refer to as VR--and employment training and readiness services from BESB.

My experience with BESB began when I received the services of an itinerant teacher who tutored and encouraged me through grade school and into secondary school until I made the transition to VR. With her guidance, I was able to succeed in mainstream public education at a time when legally blind students were routinely placed in special education. As I pursued a technical education through my secondary school years, BESB's VR division helped prepare me to live independently, and to work toward obtaining substantial gainful employment.

After I graduated high school with a vocational technical education—I was trained as a machinist—BESB gave me the support I needed: a low-vision evaluation; visual aids; tuition, fees, and equipment as well as books and transportation assistance as I pursued a career in commercial radio broadcasting.

Two years removed from high school, I realized I needed at least a bachelor's degree to reach my employment potential. BESB was there to support me financially and with excellent counsel. Seven years later when it became clear to me that I needed a master's degree to advance in my chosen field of land use planning, geography, and cartography, BESB was there to help.

Now I hold a responsible job in state government that gives me a solidly middle-class standard of living thanks in no small part to the BESB staff's dedication to their mission of giving clients the tools they need to achieve their life's potential.

The experience I just related illustrates the tremendous good VR programs can do. Not only do these programs provide equal opportunities for legally blind people to live independently, hold good jobs, and otherwise contribute to their communities, they offer returns on investment that go beyond tax and Social Security savings. When we VR clients go to work, we become taxpayers, volunteer in our communities, and give our time and money to worthy causes. In short, we make the same contributions as our fully sighted peers.

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Regarding agency consolidation, I am as much in favor of streamlined government as anyone especially in this time of fiscal crisis; I also know it is unwise to sacrifice client services at the altar of efficiency. That is what I think this proposal will do. Here's why:

- Dividing, then consolidating BESB's VR, Children's, and Adult Services divisions to the departments of social services and education would lead to complications far beyond the disruption of services during transition because each agency serving people with disabilities other than legal blindness has different eligibility and reporting requirements, not to mention that the social services department's bureau of rehabilitation services is using a triage model called order of selection to determine who receives services and when they would receive them. BESB administrators and staff have spared no effort and made sacrifices small and large to avoid putting VR clients into order of selection. Standards and indicators that measure the effectiveness of VR service delivery differ from one agency to another. A one-size-fits-all approach can in fact be more expensive to implement than the current system and would likely require legislative and regulatory changes that would take years to implement.
- While the current system is fragmented and inefficient from an administrative perspective, it works well for the clients because each agency specializes in serving the unique needs of its client base. People adjusting to using a wheelchair have different needs from those with confronting serious vision loss. These differences can be lost in a catchall administrative structure
- The consolidation proposal is focused on administrative efficiency and speculative cost saving with no acknowledgement of consolidation's deleterious effects on service delivery.

Breaking up BESB, an agency that has served the blindness community since 1893, survived the great depression, and prepared young people for employment while helping clients of all ages maintain employment while coping with vision loss, and helping seniors adjust to blindness while showing them the path to maintaining their independence and keeping their dignity would be a grave disservice to those of us who ask only for equal opportunity to realize our potential and contribute to our communities, state, and country.

Nothing is more consistent with government's fundamental role of protecting the public health, safety, and general welfare than investing in the next generation of workers that will carry us into the future while helping those who have brought us here in their hour of greatest vulnerability. This is what distinguishes us as a civil society and the land of opportunity. Thank you.